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AUTHOR Phinney, Jean S.; Ambarsoom, Hamlet
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ABSTRACT

The theoretical basis of most studies of identity development is Erikson's theory, which proposes that the achievement of a personal identity is the central developmental task of adolescence. Although Erikson mentioned the role of culture, no research has examined ethnicity directly as a dimension of identity. This study examined ethnic identity status and the relationship between ethnic identity status and other factors for three ethnic groups (Black, Mexican-American, White). Twenty undergraduate subjects from each ethnic group completed a questionnaire assessing ethnic identity status, ethnic evaluation, and personal identity status. Scores allowed an individual to be assigned to one of four ethnic identity statuses: diffuse, foreclosed, moratorium, or identity achieved. Ethnic evaluation was assessed in terms of ethnic pride and satisfaction with one's own group. Personal identity status was assessed from the ethnic identity measure. Results suggest the importance of ethnic identity status as a factor in understanding ethnic attitudes, particularly for minority groups. By late adolescence, more minority group than majority group members have thought about and made decisions concerning the meaning of their ethnic group membership, possibly precipitated by early negative feelings about their group and continuing conflicts with the mainstream culture. (ABL)

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ETHNIC IDENTITY IN YOUNG ADULTS FROM THREE ETHNIC GROUPS

Jean S. Phinney and Hamlet Ambarsoom

California State University, Los Angeles

INTRODUCTION

The theoretical basis of most studies of identity development is Erikson's (1968) theory, which proposes that the achievement of a personal identity is the central developmental task of adolescence. On the basis of the extent to which individuals have engaged in search or exploration and made a decision or commitment in terms of their own identity, they can be asssigned to an identity status. An achieved identity results from the experience of both search and commitment; identity diffusion is the status of someone who has experienced neither. A foreclosed identity means commitment without search, whereas moratorium means an on-going search without a commitment. The early empirical work based on Erikson's theory was carried out by Marcia (1966), who focused on three identity domains as the basis of personal identity development: occupation, religious beliefs, and political ideology.

Although Erikson frequently mentioned the role of culture in identity formation, no research in this conceptual framework has examined ethnicity directly as a dimension of identity. Several minority writers have studied the process of ethnic identity within specific minority groups. For example, Cross (1978) proposes a progression in Black identity development from an unexamined identity as a Black, through several stages of awareness and questioning to an internalization of resolution of one's identity, comparable to Erikson's concept of an achieved personal identity. Kim (1981) proposes a comparable model of Asian-American identity development. However, there have been few studies of ethnic identity development in young adults across several ethnic groups.

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The goals of this study were:

1. To assess ethnic identity status in young adults from three ethnic groups;

2. To examine the relationship between ethnic identity status and ethnic group membership, ethnic evaluation, and personal identity status.

Paper presented at the Western Psychological Meetings, Long Beach, California, April 23-26, 1987.

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METHOD

PROCEDURE

A questionnaire was used to assess ethnic identity status, ethnic evaluation, and personal identity status. Ethnic identity was conceptualized in terms of the four ego identity statuses defined by Marcia (1980). A measure of ethnic identity status was developed based on the Objective Measure of Ego Identity Status of Adams, Shea, and Fitch (1979). Scores allow an individual to be assigned to one of four ethnic identity statuses: diffuse, foreclosed, moratorium, or identity achieved. Ethnic evaluation was assessed in terms ethnic pride and satisfaction with one's own group. Personal identity status was assessed by the Adams, Shea, and Fitch (1979) measure, which yields scores for each identity status and allows subjects to be assigned to one of the four identity statuses.

SUBJECTS

The subjects were 60 undergraduates at an integrated urban university (10 males and 10 females from each of three ethnic groups, Black, Mexican-American, and White) who labelled themselves and their parents as belonging to that group, and who were themselves and their parents born in the United States.

RESULTS

Based on the questionnaire data, scores for each ethnic identity status were calculated for each subject, and subjects were assigned to status on the basis of the highest score among the four statuses, resulting in the following groups: diffuse: n = 15; foreclosed: n = 14; moratorium: 0; achieved: n = 21. Ten subjects could not be assigned due to identical high scores for 2 of more statuses and were treated as a fourth, unassigned group.

Ethnic identity status and ethnicity

Ethnic identity status differed significantly among the three ethnic groups. Far more White subjects were diffuse (40%) than Blacks (20%) or Mexican-Americans (15%). In contrast, the two minority groups showed high proportions ethnic identity achievement than Whites (Blacks: 45%; Mexican-Americans: 40%; Whites, 25%). See Table 1.

Ethnic identity status and personal identity status

Ethnic identity status was significantly related to personal identity status; correlations between ethnic identity status scores and the corresponding personal identity status scores ranged from $r = .33$ ($p < .05$) to $r = .53$ ($p < .001$).

Ethnic identity and ethnic evaluation

Differences in ethnic evaluation among ethnic groups approached significance, with Blacks showing higher ethnic evaluation than the other two groups. See Table 2.

However, ethnic evaluation was more strongly related to ethnic identity status than to ethnic group; subjects with achieved ethnic identity status scored higher in ethnic evaluation than did other groups. See Table 3.

Analysis of additional questionnaire items showed that significantly more achieved ethnic identity status subjects had felt bad as a child about their ethnic group membership, currently feel conflict between their own group and the mainstream culture, and almost always take the position of their own group when faced with such conflict.

DISCUSSION

These results suggest the importance of ethnic identity status as a factor in understanding ethnic attitudes, particularly for minority groups. By late adolescence, more minority group than majority group members have thought about and made decisions concerning the meaning of their ethnic group membership. This may be precipitated by early negative feelings about their ethnic group, and by continuing conflicts felt between their own and the mainstream culture. However, this process leads ultimately to greater acceptance and higher evaluation of their own ethnic group.

TABLE 1
ETHNIC IDENTITY STATUS BY ETHNIC GROUP

Ethnic identity: status		Black	Mexican-American	White	Total
Diffusion	N	4	3	8	15
	%	20%	15%	40%	25%
Foreclosure	N	5	6	3	14
	%	25%	30%	15%	23%
Achieved	N	9	8	4	21
	%	45%	40%	20%	35%
Unassigned	N	2	3	5	10
	%	10%	15%	25%	17%

TABLE 2
ETHNIC EVALUATION BY ETHNIC GROUP

	Black	Mexican-American	White	Total
Percent reporting "extremely proud" of own ethnic group	85%	60%	40%	62%

TABLE 3
ETHNIC IDENTITY STATUS AND ETHNIC PRIDE

	STATUS			
	Diffuse	Foreclosed	Achieved	Unassigned
ETHNIC PRIDE				
High				
N	8	8	16	5
%	53%	57%	76%	50%
Medium				
N	4	6	2	3
%	27%	43%	9%	30%
Low				
N	3	0	3	2
%	20%	0	14%	20%